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Tijuana, Baja California, ca. 1961.
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In Times of the Quinta Alicia

Citlalli López Binnqüist

Nacho's Father, Ernesto

Ignacio (Nacho) López Bocanegra was the eldest son of Ernesto López Osorio and María Bocanegra Elizarraras. Their four children had been born over the course of ten years and various moves: Ignacio, Lina, Ernesto and Rocío. Ernesto López was an important figure in all their lives: "Our father was a man with a great sense of humor, very dynamic and creative; enterprising and bohemian, but also egocentric and authoritarian," in the words of Ernesto and Rocío, expressing what Nacho and Lina also thought.

Ernesto López was born in the town of Medellín, Veracruz. Because his father and brother had died in the American invasion of 1914 and his mother had remarried, he spent much of his childhood alone, selling chewing gum. As a youngster he worked on the railroad and then finally found employment with the Colgate-Palmolive Company for many years. He met María Bocanegra in Tampico where she worked as a waitress at a Chinese restaurant. They moved to Mexico City, and subsequently to Córdoba, Mérida and then back to Mexico City, where the children stayed while an ailing Ernesto and his wife went to the port of Veracruz.

The family was always traveling. In so many different towns and landscapes, photography became an essential part of Ernesto's daily life and a tool of his trade. He worked for the soap and toothpaste company for almost thirty years. He began in Tampico as a window dresser and eventually became regional manager for Southern Mexico, with headquarters in Mérida. The company gave him a camera and film to document his job, especially the shop windows he decorated himself. But he used the camera for much more than just work, and began taking pictures of all sorts of things: family outings, sports events, gatherings, portraits, landscapes. The resulting photographs were spontaneous and entertaining, some of them carefully framed.

The Colgate-Palmolive Company

The Colgate Company established itself in Mexico in 1925, seeing the country as a new market in which to promote modern hygiene

habits that were already spreading as a result of changing lifestyles. Colgate merged with Palmolive a few years later and opened its main office in Mexico City. Their products very quickly gained a share of the market since there was a scarcity of brand names and little competition in the field. Practically every home, at least in cities, consumed this brand's cleaning and personal hygiene products.

Ernesto López began working for the company as a window dresser in the city of Tampico. His son Ernesto says, "our father drove to the stores in a car that he'd painted olive green with a black line like the packaging of Palmolive soap. He took along big rolls of crepe paper in several colors and got busy making bows and other decorations without the [store clerks] saying anything. He also made towers of soap and toothpaste that were a real balancing act. The window displays looked fantastic [...]. He had a lot of initiative [...] and energy, and he also dressed like Charlie Chaplin. He got a pair of gigantic shoes made, and walked around knock-kneed like Chaplin, with his little mustache [...]. He went out on the street like that carrying a placard that said, 'Use Palmolive or Colgate Soap or *Octagón* Soap,' which also belonged to Palmolive. He had another show that drew a lot of attention: he stood motionless in a window display for three hours. Only customers who guessed that he wasn't a mechanical dummy—and there were a lot of them—got three bars for the price of one."

Ernesto continues: "Our father was Palmolive's favorite [window dresser] because he was creative; the windows caused a commotion—no other representative had done anything like it. He documented all the window displays and the Chaplin performances in photographs, which he sent straight to the Colgate-Palmolive head office in Mexico City."

Satisfied with his work, the company promoted Ernesto López to manager of one of the three regions where their products were sold. Ernesto López moved to Mérida to begin his job as southern regional manager of an area that included the states of Yucatán, Campeche, Chiapas and Tabasco. He hired helpers to decorate the windows and, as a sales representative, he traveled to remote villages. His son Ernesto says, "Chiapas and Tabasco were very inhospitable places. My father had to ride a horse out to the backwoods, with boxes full of Palmolive soap, and sell them in the small towns. Nacho went with him on some of those trips, and that's how he supposedly got started with Palmolive, but [...] he was actually only working for our father, who pushed him to be enterprising."

Life in Mérida

In 1938 the López family traveled by boat from Veracruz to Mérida. There were no roads then, and they brought along all their furnishings, in addition to their dog Paloma and their parrot. The family had a very active social life in Mérida. They rented the Quinta Alicia, a rambling house from the colonial era in the center of town. The rooms on the ground floor surrounded a patio with a fountain in the middle, and two grand circular staircases connected it to the upper story.

Every week, the Quinta Alicia hosted a celebration called "The Blue Hour of Memories." Up to 200 people came to these gatherings, among them various personalities from the world of theater, like the Hermanas Aguilar. These coteries were broadcast simultaneously on two radio stations and were organized by El Club de los Ernestos ("The Ernestos' Club") founded by Ernesto

López. Only men named Ernesto could join the club and attend the gatherings, along with their families; its members included the state governor, Ernesto Novelo Torres. Besides his job at Colgate-Palmolive, Ernesto López worked as master of ceremonies and was also the president of the Soccer Society. Colgate-Palmolive bought their uniforms and balls as part of its advertising campaigns. Nacho occasionally played on this team as a child.

The family also had several guests while they lived at the Quinta Alicia. Ernesto López's childhood friend Pepe Antinus, and Mimi Vegon, a princess from the island of Bali, both stayed there for a month. Though their visits might have been short, they left a deep impression on the family, especially on Nacho's younger sister Rocío, who eventually became one of Mexico's best-known dancers. Pepe and Mimi were a dance couple who performed their act at theaters and cabarets. They rehearsed every night at the Quinta Alicia, in its huge patio. According to Rocío, who was barely eight years old at the time, "first they did their warm-up exercises and then their dance routines, they put on their music—it was like ballroom music, ballads, dreamy things. She had a fantastic wardrobe—she wore Balinese fabrics, she looked stunning. And he had such a handsome physique, and would lift her up [...] with one hand while she seemed to dance on air—wonderful. That's when I decided I wanted to be a dancer. They were still rehearsing when I had to go to bed. He kissed me on the forehead, wishing me a good night's sleep, and then my mother would say, 'Did you wash your face?' I said I had, but I didn't wash my forehead. I felt like that kiss, that star—like it was my mark."

Early Days in Photography

Nacho was in contact with photography throughout his childhood and teenage years. His father's job—which required the use of a camera—was quite unusual for the time. This, his window-dressings, and his impersonation of Charles Chaplin as an advertising gimmick, made a deep impression on Nacho as a young boy.

Nacho López decided to become a photographer during his youth, though at some point he also fantasized about studying architecture. In 1941 at the age of seventeen, his journal states: "Tuesday, January 14. I started taking photographs today, pointing to the future I want so much, as a *cameraman*.'" "Wednesday, February 5. Today I processed my first roll of film." "Saturday February 15. *Bad*[2] grade in arithmetic. My first processed and printed photograph with good results."

According to what Nacho López stated and wrote many years later, his first photograph was a portrait of his sister Rocío and a friend of hers on a Mexico City rooftop. There are also pictures of the family's pet dog, Paloma, among his first photographs. At that time, Nacho also wrote articles for the *Diario del Sureste*—a column called *Trapitos al sol* ("airing out the dirty laundry"). According to his brother Ernesto, "the articles were a kind of critique of society. That's what he wrote at first. It wasn't related to photography, but he began taking photographs around the same time. He had one of those Kodak cameras."

In Mérida, Nacho founded the Club Foto-Afición Yucateca (Amateur Photographers' Club of Yucatan), apparently with a group of friends. There is no information about what he or his group did, but this stage somehow foretells the way in which Nacho would work for the rest of his life: promoting and organizing work groups with colleagues of his.

Nacho went to high school at the Escuela Modelo, where the leftist education he received deeply influenced his political convictions, in his words: "In my school years, during the Cárdenas regime, the educational system was socialist: we sang *The Internationale*... it was fashionable then to glorify the nation's arts, the Agrarian Reform and indigenous folklore" (Nacho López, *¡Cuidado! El 'Gran Hermano' nos vigila*, 1973). His brother Ernesto further mentions, "One of Nacho's best friends at the Escuela Modelo was Antonio Menéndez [Rufo], who was the local newspaper owner's son."

Return to Mexico City

The López family moved back to Mexico City in 1944. Ernesto Jr. says, "in Yucatan our father was diagnosed with a heart condition and the doctor said he only had a few more years to live. He tried to set things up for Nacho and thought, 'My son wants to be a film director and the only place where he can do that is Mexico City, so that's where we'll go.'

"Our father took Nacho to the Churubusco Studios. Back then, he had a friend named Sánchez Tello who cast the extras and told him, 'Listen, give my son a hand.' Sánchez told him, 'Tell him to come and work as a extra here at Azteca-Churubusco Studios.' That how Nacho got started: as a movie extra."

Nacho was enthralled by motion-picture photography. Ernesto speaks of his brother's admiration for Gabriel Figueroa: "He was such a fan of his that shortly after we moved to Mexico City, there was a ceremony in which Figueroa was to receive an award. The public in those days was really exhilarated/moved/aroused by the incredible images of Flor Silvestre and *La perla*. Nacho and our father left early to get front-row seats. When he saw a chance, Nacho ran up on stage and congratulated his hero, shaking his hand. Our father also got up and asked Figueroa to give his boy an opportunity to work with him. Nacho went looking for Figueroa for months, to offer him his help, but didn't have any luck."

Because of his bad health, Ernesto López Sr. and his wife decided to move to the port of Veracruz. Before the move, he started up a project to ensure a means of survival for his children, who were staying behind in the city. He opened a photography store where they also sold crafts, in the Álamos neighborhood, called Foto Erlos (the first two letters of his name and surnames: Ernesto López Osorio). Ernesto López Sr. also bought enough equipment to set up a film-processing lab. Ernesto Jr. says, "The store did badly, since we didn't do the job well. It was in our hands: Rocío, Lina and me. We all did the processing, badly, and the photographs didn't turn out well. We'd give our customers the pictures and they would say, 'Gee, they're awful.' And we'd reply, 'It's because of how you took the picture.' Nacho also did some of processing there, but developing photos for the general public was not his calling. His calling was a personal one. He was already taking pictures all over the place by then. Our father became a sales representative for some British film company, so Nacho had enough film with which to shoot his photographs."

In 1945, Nacho began studying at the Instituto de Artes y Ciencias Cinematográficas de México (Film Arts and Sciences Institute of Mexico). While working as an extra at the film studios, he met American cameraman Kenneth Richter, a disciple of Gabriel Figueroa's. Nacho sometimes replaced Richter behind the camera, and Richter also introduced

him to other documentary motion-picture photographers, among them, Victor de Palma. De Palma hired Nacho as an unpaid apprentice, teaching him in exchange for his help as an assistant and lab technician at his photography studio, Estudios Fotográficos D'Palma, located in front of the Hotel Reforma.

Ernesto Jr. says that Nacho worked with Victor de Palma while he and his siblings remained in charge of Foto Erlos: "but we went downhill and Nacho went up, since he was already doing good work by then. Victor de Palma and his wife, who managed the store, were both happy with Nacho."

Later, Victor de Palma recommended Nacho as his substitute in the teaching of a technical photography course at the Journalism Faculty of the University of Caracas in Venezuela. Upon his return to Mexico City almost a year later, his father died and Nacho became his family's main breadwinner.

In 1949 Nacho opened his own photography studio, called Foto-Gráficas, on Balderas Street. On the fifth floor of the same building, his brother Ernesto opened an office of his own, specializing in drawing. Nacho used all the material and equipment from Foto Erlos to equip his studio and lab. He began an intense period of work, since at that time his family had little income and quite a few debts.

With Foto-Gráficas, Nacho offered his services to several photography agencies, in Mexico as well as abroad, and worked very energetically in the field of commercial photography. According to Ernesto, one of his best clients was General Electric. The López brothers did all their product shots: "We were happy with General Electric. They'd send brand-new appliances, the demonstration models, to Nacho's studio. The first television set ever sold in Mexico—we had it in the studio first. It was a huge cabinet for a pretty small TV set, but it also had a turntable, storage space for records; it was black and white and we never returned it. General Electric forgot about it, and so did we; we took it home and then it stopped working."

And here ends the account of Nacho López's early days, before he had begun working as a photojournalist in Mexico City in the 1950s—the work he is best known for, published in magazines such as *Hoy*, *Mañana*, *Así* and *Siempre!*

Notes

1 In English in the original (tr. note).

2 In English in the original (tr. note).

tr. Richard Moszka

Nacho López and "Mexicanness"

John Mraz

During the past century, artists and intellectuals insistently explored the question of what it means to be Mexican. This could be an effect of the colonial heritage—a product of the ethnic conflict between Spaniards, indigenous people, and *mestizos*—or it may have resulted from the neocolonial experience of living within the shadow of the world's most powerful nation. Whatever the long-range causes are, the immediate catalyst was the 1910–1920 Revolution. A social cataclysm of such magnitude sweeps away old ways of doing things, and makes problematic the very structures of identity that had reigned unquestioned until then. Confronted with this sudden melting away of all that seemed so solid, cultural figures attempted to provide alternative versions of national concord, as well as offer new visions of the reality-in-transformation they were living. In Mexico, we could say that this search took two roads: the official and the dissident.

On the one hand,

the project to construct a State posited a "national unity"—the reigning concept in the 1940s, replacing the pluralism of Lázaro Cárdenas's regime. Carlos Monsiváis referred to the epoch's spirit in this way: "Nothing of 'pluralism' or 'cultural diversity': *Mexico is one*."[1] Mass communications media represented that unity as presidentialism and exoticism: those on top were converted into untouchable icons; those below were made into the safely picturesque. Photographers such as Enrique Díaz, Luis Márquez and Hugo Brehme crystallized Mexicanness in the faces of great patriarchs and the anonymous figures of indigenous people and *campesinos* who smiled and suffered for the illustrated magazines, while filmmakers such as Emilio Fernández and Gabriel Figueroa placed these icons on the screen. The picturesque served the new order by providing a non-threatening place in society for those who wore neither suit nor tie. Moreover, it could be easily marketed to foreigners who were often convinced of the authenticity of folkloric representations that were actually caricatures of Latin American culture.

On the other hand, those who rejected the easy road of the picturesque and the official, and attempted to construct an anti-picturesque and historical vision of Mexicanness in the post-revolutionary epoch, included photographers Tina Modotti and Manuel Álvarez Bravo, as well as the filmmaker Fernando de Fuentes. Álvarez Bravo's redemption of ordinary people and their daily life has had a great impact on Mexican photographers, and their expressions of identity. One of the most notable photographers to follow the route indicated by Álvarez Bravo, Nacho López, proposed to rescue the undeniable existence of the apparently invisible, and the dignity of the evidently insignificant. His search for an aesthetic that would provide an account of the disinherited appeared during the 1950s in photographic essays that he published in *Hoy*, *Mañana* and *Siempre!* ("Today," "Tomorrow" and "Always!")—Mexican illustrated magazines that participated in the worldwide boom of this medium along with publications such as *Life*, *Look*, *Picture Post*, *Vu* and many others.[2] Explicitly concerned with the issue of national identity, López produced photo-essays such as *México: dolor y sangre, pasión y alma* (Mexico: Pain and Blood, Passion and Soul) and *México místico* (Mystic Mexico), at the same time as he explored Mexico City as a microcosm of the nation, in essays such as *Un día cualquiera en la vida de la ciudad* (A Normal Day in the City's Life) and *Las mil caras de la ciudad* (The City's Thousand Faces).

Distant from presidentialism, Nacho López proposed an alternative to the period's uniformity in photo-essays that define the national character through the many Mexicos he portrayed. These essays are about "worlds apart"—obviously, they were universes far distant from that of the magazines' middle-class readers, but they were also diametrically opposed to the homogeneous vision constructed by the regime. The worlds captured by López were those of the poor and the caged, those that live from dangerous and unusual work... those who were invisible in president Miguel Alemán's universe. And they were presented as "worlds" in and of themselves, not as existences at the margins of any "real" Mexico. Snaggle-toothed pool players in tatters live in "their world of adventures." They might be considered failures from the perspective of 1940s Mexican society, but their animated and dynamic expressions show that they have constructed

"their own fabulous world of triumphs and defeats."[3]

Although Nacho López would come to express Mexicanness in the daily-life terms introduced by Álvarez Bravo, the temptation to follow the stereotypically picturesque route was reflected in his first photo-essay, *Noche de muertos*, published in 1951. The dominant tradition of "Indigenist" photography was (and often still is) that of representing indigenous people as passive but dignified victims, and Nacho conformed to this convention, portraying the Purépecha women and children with a tone of resignation and stoicism, by photographing from above "their impassive faces that reflect no sentiment." One could apply to López the criticism made by Alan Sekula of "the tendency of professional documentary photographers to aim their cameras downward, toward those with little power or prestige."[4] Moreover, the use of this angle is particularly reproachable in light of the fact that he was utilizing a Rolleiflex camera, which he held at the level of his waist.[5] Had he been using a 35mm camera, which is raised to the eye, the angle would have been more understandable. That he chose to photograph from such a high angle can only be understood as an expressive decision, not only of his aesthetic, but also of his political perspective toward indigenous people. His imagery calls to mind the visual style of Gabriel Figueroa, and though we might interpret López's exotic portrayal of the Purépechas as part of his search for "worlds apart," the picturesque quality of his images allows them to be incorporated all too easily into the official rhetoric of nationalism.

One of Nacho López's photographs has been reproduced time and again in books and magazines, evidently striking a deep chord in his country's psyche. The image is of a "*Campesino* reading a piece of newspaper, 1949," according to the description that Nacho wrote on the envelopes of the four negatives in his archive. On one of the envelopes, López wrote "(poster) campaign?"—perhaps a reference to its possible use in a government literacy program. This had been the forum for the best-known image of the Mayo Brothers: one by Paco Mayo that had won the grand prize of *Palpitaciones de la vida nacional*, an important photojournalism exhibition organized by the art critic Antonio Rodríguez in 1947.[6] Paco's photograph of an old peasant woman learning to read by candlelight together with her grandchildren was openly moving and sentimental. López's image—powerful, contradictory, and impertinent—does not admit such an easy reading. The photograph is taken from below but, in an angle reserved for the powerful, an "underdog" appears. That is, the camera points up to portray what it usually captures pointing down (if it actually pays any attention to the underside).

Obviously, low-angle shots are often employed not only to depict leaders and other important personages but also to express the power of a class; one example would be the Mayo Brothers' image of the worker shouldering a hammer.[7] Nonetheless, in López's photograph of the *campesino*, this individual's singularity will not permit him to be reduced to a symbol of his class. He cannot stand for them in the same way that they are represented in the Mayo Brothers' pictures from La Laguna, where the low angle makes the peasants' pitchforks stand out against the sky. The particularity of López's *campesino* is derived from his physiognomy, as well as the pose he assumes. This is not the typical rural victim, hungry and sad; nor is it the picturesque peasant, grinning stupidly

at the camera. Relaxed and with a slight smile, it is evident that he is posing for the photographer. We know that the photo is posed, because of the four surviving negatives that exist. However, within the image itself there is reference to this, perhaps most of all in the way he holds the piece of newspaper in his hand as if following the photographer's instructions, but in a way that is also somehow uniquely his.

The collaboration of photographer and photographed resulted in a complex image whose iconographic elements are rooted in the transformations which marked this period. The *sombrero* and sunburned skin identify him as a farmhand, but the overalls are clothing typical of an urban worker. Moreover, the walls surrounding him connote a citified space. We could read the image of this individual as a symbol of the transition of Mexicans from rural beings to city dwellers during this era. We could add to that reading the idea that the photographer's intention in giving him the paper was that of creating the metaphor: "broken paper/broken man." Thus, we would have a visual rendering of what an important Mexican thinker has described as "the tragedy of the Indian *campesino* obliged to become a proletarian before his time," one of the presumed sources of the mythical inferiority complex which was crucial to theories of Mexicanness developed during this epoch.[8] Nonetheless, the singularity of this individual conflicts with our expectations of symbolism, confronting us with an "every Mexican" who is, at the same time, only himself.

Concerned with redefining national symbols, Nacho López focused on a recurring motif of Mexican culture: death. In the pages of the magazine *Hoy*, he stated that, "With profound respect, Mexicans laugh at death."[9] And, he later gave this theme a playful twist, laughing in the face of mortality by having a man pose as if he is being measured for one of the caskets that appear in a shop behind him.

Another fundamental element of Mexicanness is machismo, and López represented his perspective in one of his most famous photos, that of a beautiful woman under the masculine gaze. It is revealing to compare this image with similar scenes captured by other photojournalists. López held his camera at waist level when he photographed the notorious Maty Huitrón, object of the men's flirtatious remarks. This angle makes her stand out and apart from her "admirers," who do not encroach upon her space, giving her a sense of power, in the midst of masculinity. In contrast, Ruth Orkin's image of *An American Girl in Rome* is taken from a slightly high angle. This traps the model who, thinner and frailer than Huitrón, clutches her shawl as if to protect herself from the men, who are more aggressive than those appearing in López's photo. Thus, Orkin more clearly portrays the harassment that women suffer in the street thanks to such "compliments," something also captured by Xavier Miserachs in *El piropo*, a spontaneous photograph in which a woman steps off the sidewalk in order to avoid a man who throws himself at her.[10] When compared to Orkin's and Miserachs's images, López's photo can be seen as a visual celebration, in form and content, of the hyper-machismo that, unfortunately, sometimes seems to be an integral part of Mexican identity.

Although he was not religious, López understood that faith, above all in the Virgin of Guadalupe, is one of the pillars of Mexicanness. For that reason, he placed this revered figure at the center of his photo-essay *México místico*; in another illus-

trated article, he reflected on the act of picturing her by photographing a couple standing in front of the Virgin's image, in which he included the photographer who is making their souvenir. In the scenario provided to take portraits of visitors at the Basílica of Guadalupe, we see the use of prefabricated symbols to promote an official identity. But, by including the photographer, López's picture points out the responsibility of image-making in the process of creating a sanctimonious, homogeneous and exclusive nationalism that weighs heavily on the Mexican soul. Obviously, his own photographic act demonstrated possible alternative uses of this art.

A photography exhibition that Nacho López curated in the mid-1950s provides a glimpse into the very particular ways that Mexican identity could be defined, and the nefarious uses that were made of this construct, sometimes by members of the press itself. When *Nacho López, fotógrafo de México* was shown in November 1955 at the Salón de la Plástica Mexicana in Mexico City, a gallery belonging to the National Institute of Fine Arts (or INBA), it does not appear to have provoked any controversy. López was one of few photojournalists to stage a solo show, though antecedents included one organized by Antonio Rodríguez in 1947.[11] The Mexico City public was thus somewhat accustomed to seeing photojournalism in a space usually reserved for art, and many of the images in López's exhibition had been published before in illustrated magazines. The surprise was all the greater, then, when this same exhibition produced a "tempest in a teacup" because it "denigrated Mexico" a year later in Washington DC.

López had combed his archive to create a show that "presents human beings in the midst of their struggle to survive in a hostile society."[12] He believed that, "Photography is a powerful weapon for denouncing [injustice]," and felt that he "photographed the underprivileged as people full of dignity and self-esteem." He contrasted his position with that of the "furtive photographer-hunter," whose superficiality converted misery into "picturesque images": "I am here, what luck! You are there, what misfortune! In such expressions, there is no communication." López argued that photographers had to establish a relationship with the photographed: "Sitting down to eat tacos with workers and farmers, sleeping on the earth protected only by roofs made of plastic and cardboard, getting drunk with the regulars at a *pulque* bar, conversing, traveling in second-class buses—these are the ways to try to understand people." López's perspicacity is demonstrated in his acknowledgment of the two great problems facing those who would portray Mexico: its endemic exoticism, and the ongoing process of Americanization that was becoming pronounced among certain members of the new urban middle class. López argued: "The great challenge of our time consists in not making colonialist photography. I have attempted to criticize the subtle phenomena that imperialism employs to subdue us and make us feel inferior."

The exhibition *Nacho López: Photographer of Mexico*, was mounted in the Pan American Union, seat of the Organization of American States, and reactions were initially quite favorable. The Mexican ambassador to the US, Manuel Tello, inaugurated it along with Luis Quintanilla, the Mexican representative to the OAS, on August 29, 1956. Tello commented that López was a "marvelous example of those Mexican artists who dedicate themselves to representing the most real, and sometimes the

most tragic, aspects of Mexico."[13] The OAS magazine, *Américas*, published an article on the show, noting that the imagery was unconventional but, "like the anguished Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh, López strives to express the hidden beauty of human beings in torment... These men and women, filled with wisdom and humility as they engage in the trivia of daily life, face their hours of tragedy and triumph with a simple human dignity."[14] The magazine added that the exhibition "will subsequently go on tour throughout the United States."

López appeared to be sitting on top of the world. The OAS's Director of Visual Arts, José Gómez Sicre, wrote to López, saying, "You seem to have a very brilliant future in front of you," and described the opportunities that were opening up. Several magazines had expressed interest in publishing López's photos and, moreover, the San Francisco Museum of Art and the New Orleans Museum wanted the exhibition.[15] *Life en español* published a piece on López in their issue of November 19, 1956, in which they stated, "His lens has a heart."[16] The New York City-based magazine *Visión* dedicated a page to his images, and described the "international success" of his photography, which "is centered on the life of the underclass, of the people in the street, in their profound, secular sense of death, and in the stoicism they always demonstrate in the face of pain."[17] The US Embassy in Mexico offered to buy the photo of hands under a prison door that had appeared on the catalogue's cover.[18] Gómez Sicre ended one letter by stating: "Your reputation will acquire the international status that it has deserved for some time."

Despite the promising future that seemed to lie before Nacho López, he had not counted on the narrow limits of the definition of Mexicanness, nor on the role journalists would play as self-appointed "watchdogs" to determine what was acceptable in representing the nation. It appears that a group of Mexico City reporters who were traveling in the US saw the show at the Pan American Union, and were offended—"as Mexicans"—by what they believed were images that "denigrated Mexico."[19] Their nationalist fury was such that they questioned López's right to be a citizen: "A certain Ignacio López, the photographer who put on the exhibition, says he's Mexican, but there is no official record of this, and his true nationality is unknown."[20] They felt that López had "presented only the lowest aspects of our city's life," and while they recognized that it was somewhat "incoherent" to argue that photos that had been displayed and published in Mexico should be censored in a foreign exhibition, they nonetheless stated, "Dirty laundry shouldn't be shown outside the home."

The journalists complained to Ambassador Manuel Tello, but when he refused to intervene, they took their case to Luis Quintanilla. He may have been more vulnerable, or less diplomatic, because he agreed that the exhibition, "whatever its artistic merit, did not reflect the degree of civilization and progress that currently exists in our country and, hence, has seriously damaged our nation's reputation."[21] Quintanilla ordered some of the pictures removed from the show and must have brought pressure to bear upon Gómez Sicre because, in what appears to be his last correspondence with López, the OAS official informed him that "The unjust and malicious attack by a group of journalists that came to Washington has made me cancel all efforts to tour the show in the US."

Within Mexico, friends of López such as the famous artist José

Luis Cuevas rallied around him. A young and promising anthropologist, Raúl Flores Guerrero, wrote an impassioned defense of photographic realism, the "most wounding and most human" of the arts.[22] For Flores Guerrero, López "aspired only to leave the most truthful account, at once beautiful and dramatic, sublime and heartrending, of current reality, the most complete vision of all that constitutes the real Mexico." In this battle over Mexicanness, Flores Guerrero concluded: "It is not the photographs of Nacho López that denigrate Mexico. What is denigrating is the attitude of Mexicans who do not have the capacity to appreciate the most transcendental art that has been produced in the country, whether that be the painterly art of an Orozco or a Rivera, or the photographic art of 'a certain Ignacio López.'" Notwithstanding Flores Guerrero's articulate pleadings in favor of a national identity based on a realistic appraisal of the country's situation, Nacho López's first international efforts to employ photography's indexical power in order to construct a critical representation of his country ran aground on the shoals of a nationalism designed to keep Mexicans in their place.

Although Nacho López's colleagues showed great enthusiasm in criticizing him for "denigrating Mexico," he appears to have been the only photojournalist willing, or able, to grapple explicitly with the theme of his country.[23] The images and text of the essay *Mexico: Pain and Blood, Passion and Soul* portray the country's enormous discrepancies, and its extraordinarily unequal class relations: "Lights and shadows of Mexico! The permanent contrast of its people; misery and opulence, serenity and violence in their hearts, the present and the past in daily life. Passion, blood, pain. All are part of the Mexican essence."

The essay's key photo is a portrait of a "stooping hero" in a particularly afflicted version of the stereotypical pose, his jacket in tatters, and his hands clutching the crown of his ancient *sombrero*.[24] The text calls for empathy, and insists in the unique capacity of photography to be a witness: "It is as if the Indian tried to hide the shame of his misery and neglect beneath his wide *sombrero*. This is more than simply a photograph, it is a document." Nonetheless, while it was certainly valid to critique the poverty in which the State had sunk rural workers, this image is not so much an index of the social situation as it is a document of the photographer's intentions.

In fact, the "Indian" (who resembles a poor urban dweller, or a friend of López's who has put on an old jacket and *sombrero* for the picture) is part of a rather elaborate scenario that the photographer staged in front of a weather-beaten wooden house that provides a nicely textured backdrop. Behind the "Indian," López posed a boy who mirrors the main character's anguish: the child leans against the house, his head bent down on his arm as if distressed. This boy was cropped completely out of the magazine's image, probably because the direction is too apparent.

The "stooping hero" had been an archetype of Mexican identity since Samuel Ramos popularized the *peladito* (poor devil) in *Profile of Man and Culture in Mexico*, a work published in 1934. This myth had grown so powerful among intellectuals searching for Mexicanness that one scholar of the literature on what makes Mexico Mexican concluded that these works had "concentrated the features of society's most oppressed members into a symbol of the entire nation."[25] Although this figure was the opposite

of the successful, suit and tie-clad citizen of the Miguel Alemán years, serving as a reminder that millions of Mexicans were trapped in a misery without end, López's photo is nonetheless too insistent in offering an image of defeat as a model of Mexicanness.

Among the seven pictures in this photo-essay, two are of poor children: one of a girl who lives in "misery and lowliness," and the other of a boy who reads in "the street: his school." In the text accompanying the image of the boy, Nacho López slammed the picturesque nationalism pushed by a mystifying press, noting that the boy was reading an exoticizing tract about the "Remote corners and landscapes of marvelous Mexico." In another photo two women are portrayed working in an "old, modernized tortilla factory," which is described by López as a synthesis of the *pueblo*, "the people." And, in yet another picture, "humble people" are shown making fireworks—craftsmen identified as an "ancient Mexican character." The remaining two photos do not contain human figures, but represent Mexicanness in an image of "expressive Mexican *charros' sombreros*" placed against an adobe wall, as well as in a picture of candles, of which "every Catholic man and woman is a potential buyer." However, the candles serve not only as a reference to Catholicism, but as a metaphor for Mexico's underdevelopment: "In towns that have not yet benefited from electrical power—has progress really gotten anywhere?—making candles is a big industry."

In an essay written during the 1970s, Nacho López vindicated nationalism: "How can one not be nationalist in art, technology, science, philosophy, etc., in Mexico or Latin America, when we clearly see the banditry of transnational corporations? One would have to be blind to ignore that art is one of the most important ideological weapons to defend ourselves as a weak nation, and to show that misery and social injustice exist. And, in art, pamphlets promoting folklore are one thing, and nationalism quite another."[26]

In sum, no other photojournalist defined Mexicanness in terms so unambiguously pluralist. The Mexico that Nacho López portrayed in his best photo-essays was not that which his colleagues in the press fell all over themselves to cover—that of the presidents and the politicians, the bankers and the businessmen, the celebrities, the actors and actresses of a cinema made, like the rest, to the measure of a sentimental nationalism's needs. Nacho López's Mexicanness was constructed from the wide range of worlds he photographed.

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Notes

1 Carlos Monsiváis, "Sociedad y cultura", *Entre la guerra y la estabilidad política: El México de los 40*, Rafael Loyola (ed.), Mexico City, CNCA and Grijalbo, 1990, p. 264.

2 See my works, *Nacho López: Mexican Photographer*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2003; and "Today, Tomorrow and Always: The Golden Age of Illustrated Magazines in Mexico, 1937-1960" in *Fragments of a Golden Age: The Politics of Culture in Mexico since 1940*, Gilbert Joseph, Anne Rubenstein & Eric Zolov (eds.), Durham, Duke University Press, 2001, pp. 116–157.

3 Nacho López, "Jugadores de billar: un estudio psicológico de Nacho López" in *Siempre!* #44, April 24, 1954, p. 20.

4 Alan Sekula, "Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation)" in *The Massachusetts Review*,

XIX:4, Winter, 1978, p. 865.

5 Interview with Rodrigo Moya, 1999.

6 The exhibition by Antonio Rodríguez is also known as *Homenaje a los fotógrafos de prensa (México visto por los fotógrafos de prensa)*, Mexico City, Asociación Mexicana de Fotógrafos de Prensa/INBA, 1947, and *Primera exposición nacional de la fotografía de prensa*.

7 See this photo in John Mraz and Jaime Vélez Storey, *Uprooted: Braceros in the Hermanos Mayo Lens*, Houston: Arte Público Press, 1996, p. 61.

8 Roger Bartra, *La jaula de la melancolía. Identidad y metamorfosis del mexicano*, Mexico City: Grijalbo, 1987, p. 110.

9 Nacho López, "México místico" in *Hoy* #838, March 14, 1953, p. 28.

10 López's and Orkin's photos are directed, while Miserach's appears to be candid. See the photo by Ruth Orkin in her book *A Photo Journal*, New York, Viking Press, 1981, p. 90, and on the site www.orkinphoto.com/amergirl.html. Misrachs's photo can be seen at www.amicortina.com/fotpuntvistaesp/miserachsesp.htm.

11 Agustín Víctor Casasola organized an exhibition of photojournalism in 1911 entitled *Primera exposición de arte fotográfica en México*.

12 The citations in this paragraph can be found in a manuscript probably written in 1956, in reference to the show. It begins with the words, "Una tempestad en un vaso de agua..." López Binnqüist Family Archive (AFLB).

13 *Excélsior*, August 31, 1956, AFLB. This journalistic note remarks that the show was "a great success."

14 R.N., "The Mexico of Nacho López," *Américas*, October 1956, p. 33.

15 See the correspondence between Nacho López and José Gómez Sicre in AFLB.

16 "Hablando de fotografías: visión mexicana de la muerte. Fotografías de Nacho López" in *Life en español*, November 19, 1956, pp. 10–12.

17 *Visión*, 1956, AFLB.

18 Letter from Harry Edwards, assistant cultural attaché, American Embassy in Mexico, November 9, 1956, AFLB.

19 See the newspaper clippings and manuscripts about this scandal in AFLB. The main complaints seem to have come from *Novedades*, a newspaper in which Miguel Alemán had "direct interests." Stephen R. Niblo, *Mexico in the 1940s: Modernity, Politics, and Corruption*, Wilmington, Scholarly Resources, 1999, p. 346.

20 *Novedades*, November 3, 1956, AFLB.

21 *Idem*.

22 Raúl Flores Guerrero, "Las fotografías que 'denigran' a México" in *México en la cultura*, November 25, 1956, p. 5, AFLB.

23 "México: dolor y sangre, pasión y alma" in *Siempre!* #100, May 25, 1955, pp. 22–24. This photoessay is made up of López's archival images, some of which had appeared in other essays, such as the girl watching her mother cook (entitled *Una vez fuimos humanos*) and the boy reading in the street (*La calle lee*). In 1951, *Mañana* dedicated a large section to "El mexicano," which included a superficial photoessay about Mexicans, *En su identificación con la tierra, crisol de la raza*, by Arno Brehme. In the discussion on the various aspects of Mexicanness, no mention was made of photography. *Mañana* #420, September 15, 1951, pp. 83–232. López's photoessay *México místico* does not contemplate the nation, but instead focuses on religion.

24 The photograph occupies the upper right-hand corner of an odd-numbered page, identified as the preferred space in a publication by Lorenzo Vilches, in *Teoría de la imagen periodística*, Barcelona, Ediciones Paidós, 1987, p. 63.

25 See Michael Maccoby, "El carácter nacional mexicano" in *Anatomía del mexicano*, Roger Bartra (ed.), Mexico City, Plaza y Janés, 2002, p. 249. See also the chapter, "El héroe agachado" in Bartra, *La jaula de la melancolía*, pp. 107–115.

26 Manuscript that begins with the words, "Los integrantes del grupo disidente del Salón de la Plástica Mexicana hemos acordado...", AFLB.

On the Razor's Edge: The Unassuming Avant-Garde Photography of Nacho López

Laura González Flores

> *What matters is not the regularity with which syntax functions but its variations: its transgressions, deviations and exceptions—everything that makes a work unique.*
> Octavio Paz, *El signo y el garabato*

"*To move about, vulnerable, along the razor's edge*": this is how Nacho López describes the internal struggle of an artist trying to achieve a perfect balance between the form and content of his work.[1] The razor's edge is an image also used by Olivier Debroise to suggest a constant movement between "what is merely informative and what constitutes personal expression"[2] in the work of Nacho López. The term "photojournalist" that is commonly employed in referring to this photographer from the state of Tamaulipas is something of a misnomer, because of the limited idea it gives of an unusual and complex body of work; here we are faced with a complex intellectual product that transcends photography, and inevitably presents itself as an inquiry into antithetical relationships: news photography versus art photography, the aesthetic intention versus social concerns, theory versus praxis, word versus image.

Time and again, critical and historical texts have characterized Nacho López's work as pioneering, and even today it continues to challenge our capacity to understand and describe it. In the first place, because it is not just a collection of photographs, but rather an infinite series of images that can be re-grouped based on three main categories that López himself specifies as: 1) miscellaneous photographs, 2) news reports, and 3) documentary essays.[3] We must also consider his use of text, as can be seen in his pieces for *Mañana, Hoy* or *Siempre!*, published between 1950 and 1958,[4] or in his now classic essay *Yo, el ciudadano*, originally published in *Artes de México* in 1964.[5] López's writings are as important as his photographs: in them, the photographer translates his pictures' literal and/or symbolic meaning into poetic phrases or descriptive prose. Moreover, after he began teaching in 1976, López expanded the scope of his photographic work by developing a semiotic theory—a parallel aesthetics that would serve as the basis of the courses he taught.

It seems that Nacho López's body of intellectual work could have functioned as an avant-garde project in the extended sphere of twentieth-century Mexican photography, given its liminal character, its heterogeneity and the many roles it played. In this article, I will try to develop this hypothesis based on a comparative analysis of a small but important portion of López's photographic work—his pictures of windows, window displays and reflections—with certain photographs on the same subject by Manuel Álvarez Bravo.

There is no doubt about the avant-garde qualities of well-known photographs by Álvarez Bravo like *La parábola óptica, Caballo en aparador* or *Ventana de radiografías*, all of them from the early 1930s: international criticism has considered them to be symptomatic of the modernity of Mexican photography, or as a local version of Surrealism.[6] In turn, it might appear strange to describe Nacho López's photographs from 1950 to 1980 as avant-garde, since we tend to associate the development of the avant-garde with the art movements of the early twentieth century (Futurism, Cubism, constructivism,

Surrealism, etc.).

The universal historiography of art generally designates as "vanguards" those art movements or tendencies that were the first to violently criticize Western art's hegemonic rules of representation and production at the beginning of the twentieth century. Even so, if we analyze the development of these avant-garde movements in different parts of the world, we will see that they were actually made up of diverse artistic and stylistic projects, and that they developed over long periods of time throughout the twentieth century. This is why "avant-garde" is usually identified as an attitude towards art and its making, rather than with specific forms or styles.

The avant-garde attitude towards art is precisely that of a journey "*along the razor's edge.*" The common denominator of avant-garde movements is the continual transgression of the limits of art. It differs from modernity in terms of its final intent: modernity criticizes and transgresses but then puts forth new ideas and norms, whereas the avant-garde's destruction and transgression leads only to skepticism and unanswered questions. It is utopian. Its results are not new normative projects for art, but rather hybrid, heterogeneous actions and products that are difficult to define and comprehend. The difference between these two rebel strategies lies in what direction their practice takes: the action of modernity tends to centripetal concentration, while the avant-garde tends to centrifugal dispersion.[7]

Therefore, the problem with the avant-garde is the eventual dispersion of its underlying powers. A utopian practice, it comes to a dead-end, as Peter Bürger notes in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*: the erosion of artistic borders by the actions of the avant-garde is such that its effects transcend the realm of art and spread into social reality, like yet another political action.[8] Even though Bürger already speaks of "post-avant-garde" art in his book, the periodic outbreak of transgressive art movements over the twentieth century leads us to think that the avant-garde is not a critically-minded art movement that occupied a specific time period, but rather a group of diverse tendencies that emerged in a sporadic manner over time, as a radical form of criticizing art-making and its relationship with society in a given period.

Nacho López's work clearly manifests this social concern since he believed that "great art" was that which has deep social roots: "the artist who expresses the injustices of his time in his work discovers the mechanisms of oppression that minorities use to enslave the majorities."[9] Thus, when he states that, "photography is essentially a document. Photography is, period," he is not denying the possibility that photography is an art form (a view he defends in writings such as "Photography as an Element of Mexican Visual Art"), but rather claiming that there is a specific form of expression characteristic of photography. This argument for the specificity of photography is typically modern, while the first (referring to photography's changing, social character) is typical of the avant-garde. As we have seen, modernity and the avant-garde are both concerned with change, but achieve it in different ways. Either or both of these tendencies may be present in the work of a particular artist or may be prevalent in the same period.

This last point should be explained. Even if it is not within the scope of this article to provide an exhaustive description of the complex process of the emergence of modern and avant-garde photography, it is important to point out

that its birth and development followed very different paths on either side of the Atlantic. In the United States, modern photography can be traced to the establishment of "straight" photography, i.e. photography that emphasized its autonomy as a genre by adopting a formal, abstract language that distanced itself from pictorialism. In Europe, however, different avant-garde movements adopted the modernity of photography by taking advantage of its capacity for mechanical reproduction in order to transcend the medium itself and transpose it onto the social, public sphere. While in North America, photography found a place for itself in the art world[10], in Europe, the influence of photography was felt through various movements (Futurism, Dada, constructivism, Surrealism, etc.) in different spheres of urban, industrial society: film, illustration, advertising, the press, political propaganda, the business world, etc.[11]

How did Mexican photography assimilate and express the spirit of modernity? A hybrid culture if there is one, Mexico and its photography present characteristics of both the modern and avant-garde strategies. The modern tendency has ties with stark formalism (for example, the work of Edward Weston, Tina Modotti and Álvarez Bravo's first stage), while the avant-garde tendency sees photographic practice as an essential part of social communication, but not necessarily of the arts. Examples of the latter can be found in illustrated magazines as well as commercial and industrial advertising (for example, photographs commissioned by La Tolteca, Álvarez Bravo's ads, Agustín Jimenez' photographic essays), photomontages for film posters or for political propaganda (e.g. José Renau's movie posters and calendars, Enrique Gutmann's photomontages for *Futuro*), and the filming of short government-propaganda films (for example, Álvarez Bravo's camera work in *El petróleo nacional*).

The differences between the two phases of photographic modernity (the modern constructive one, and the avant-garde deconstructive) are quite subtle; moreover, there are no precise limits in terms of the time periods in which they occur, and various photographers, depending on the way they approached photographic practice, made both kinds of work. For all these reasons, I will present in what follows a few specific examples, so these subtle differences can be more easily perceived.

Modernity and/or Vanguard

The city begins to open its eyes, a little bit like him. / The noises: ads for the ears; the ads, / noise for the eyes, attack him. / He had forgotten about them. He keeps walking.

Xavier Villaurrutia, *Un joven de la ciudad*, 1933

The third issue of *Imagen* magazine —an illustrated review of which only twelve issues were published, over the summer of 1933— included this excerpt of Villaurrutia's, describing the mixture of sensory, visual and auditory impressions experienced by a young man walking in the streets of Mexico after a long convalescence. The page bearing Villaurrutia's text also features three well-known photographs of storefronts by Manuel Álvarez Bravo, circa 1931: *Maniquí tapado, Caballo en aparador* and *Parábola óptica*. This last image was published in its original version, with the text "óptica moderna" legible rather than in the inverted form we are now familiar with.

The first thing we notice in Álvarez Bravo's pictures is precisely the dialogue they establish with Villaurrutia's text. Instead of illustrating it, they refer to a single, specific

meaning: the perceptual disorientation caused by the visual hodgepodge of objects, reflections and words in an everyday urban setting. The pictures are a visual signifier equivalent to the sensory, visual and auditory confusion described in the text. In contrast to Álvarez Bravo's photographs of the 1920s, these no longer feature a stable and specific point of view, nor any geometric stability or "cleanness," nor is there a dynamic, haptic space. Instead there is sensory confusion, psychological unrest and a range of juxtaposed perceptions. Images become symbols, words become images, things function as signs, a reflection becomes the thing itself. Beings and things can be seen in a fragmented state, each fragment with its own specific space and perspective. Or they may become as transparent and immaterial as ghosts. The actual, haptic space is now a territory governed by the laws of the psyche: it becomes subjective, blurred and intangible.

Whether or not they were made expressly to be published in this magazine (or, as Álvarez Bravo has stated, for a 1931 window-display contest in which Agustín Jiménez also participated),[12] these pictures express a totally different discourse from that of his photographs from the 1920s, such as *Colchón* (1926) or *Juego de papel* (1927), which are examples of elegant abstraction. These photographs place emphasis on the fact that they are first and foremost *images, or "representations in absentia,"* by focusing on windows and/or reflections. They tend to negate what they represent. The subject, then, is depicted as something that is absent, false or paradoxical in the image: in *Maniquí tapado*, for instance, the figure's nudity is unnecessarily covered by a piece of cloth. This action is useless and absurd, since a mannequin's wooden body cannot feel ashamed (though it can incite desire by means of imaginary projection, and this is the level at which the image functions). This gesture denies but also emphasizes the presence of the windowpane, which is what actually allows the spectator to identify the mannequin as such (and not as a nude body that, for an instant, we perceive to be real). In terms of this image's incorporation of the window display and mannequin (and by extension, of the marionette or doll), readers should recall that these elements were common in Surrealism and Dada, and in Mexico, in the poetry of the *Estridentistas* and the *Contemporáneos*.

Parábola óptica places us at the very center of an urban modernity filled with signs that fall apart and proliferate: the body (the eye) and the spirit (behind the vision) are contrasted various times in this picture to suggest the multiplicity and plurality of words and images characteristic of modernity. The "modern viewpoint" is nothing but the paradoxical assertion of the intermingling of the body's vision with the camera's optical system—an idea that would become even more apparent when Álvarez Bravo decided to print the image inverted, which is the way he presented it for the exhibition organized by the Sociedad de Arte Moderno in 1945.[13] In any case, *Parábola óptica* is a good example of how modern photographic syntax, which tends towards semantic ambiguity, opens up new possibilities for the dissemination and reinterpretation of images.

Of the three photographs published in *Imagen* in 1933, *Caballo en aparador* is the one that best exemplifies the character of the 1930s' avant-garde, whose spirit and techniques Nacho López would reappropriate two decades later. In a departure from *Maniquí tapado* and *Parábola óptica, Caballo en aparador* does not depict

the frame or windowpane that delimitates the window display. Objects, text, lights and reflections intermingle: there is no difference between the real and the imaginary, the object and its reflection. Supplanted by the small but conspicuous figure of a polo player in the window display, the real individual (the photographer, almost imperceptibly reflected in the glass) loses much of his presence and identity in a world of ubiquitous ghosts.

The complex, ambiguous symbolic photographic syntax of Álvarez Bravo's window displays is a point of departure for Nacho López's pictures of reflections and windows twenty years later: one of the most notable moments in his work as a "photojournalist."

1930-1950

> [...] *in his stone-eagle and air-snake eyes, Cienfuegos was the city, its voices, memories, noises and forebodings, he was the vast and anonymous city* [...] *he was the water-towers and the rooftops, the blackened flowerpots, the glass skyscrapers and mosaic-covered domes...*
>
> Carlos Fuentes, *Where the Air is Clear*, 1958

If Álvarez Bravo's photographs of window displays concurr with Villaurrutia's writings, Nacho López's relate in a similar manner to Fuentes's: "*This is where we must live.*" Ixca Cienfuegos's statement in Fuentes's novel *Where the Air is Clear* is fundamental in understanding the localism prevalent in López's work: "*I was born and live in Mexico City. This in itself is not a serious issue. In Mexico there is no such thing as tragedy, since everything is disgraceful.*"

López's photographs can also be associated with the typically Mexican psychological outlook that Octavio Paz describes in *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1949), or with the social focus of Luis Buñuel's *Los olvidados* (1950). While Álvarez Bravo is part of the generation that lived through the Mexican Revolution—and that Manuel López Morín called the "Generation of 1915"—Nacho López belongs to the "Generation of 1929": people who did not experience the revolution firsthand but were nonetheless its ideological heirs.[14] Octavio Paz clearly sums up this generation's sentiment: "for us, poetic and revolutionary activity were indistinguishable from each other, they were one and the same."[15]

Intellectuals from the Generation of 1915 like Álvarez Bravo grew up isolated from the world outside Mexico and fought to rebuild the country. They played an active role in the utopian post-revolutionary project, launching initiatives in the fields of education, academic research and the arts. As Enrique Krauze states, they rejected "creative violence" in favor of plain and simple creativity.[16] In this sense, it is understandable that Álvarez Bravo's photography had a *constructive* bias. For this reason, the aforesaid pictures of windows displays stand out among the rest of his work: their unique *avant-garde* stance denotes an anomalous *deconstructive* action in his work. If we examine the development of Álvarez Bravo's work, we will see that he abandons this deconstructive strategy after 1933 in favor of what the critic Antonio Rodríguez calls a "photo-poetic" quality.[17] Álvarez Bravo's characteristic stylistic "poetry" arises from his ability to put together contrasting objects and situations that are nevertheless typical of Mexico, as a country trapped between the rural and urban, the ancient and modern. It is this quality that made André Breton consider him a "Surrealist," though Siquieros criticized him for jumping on the bandwagon of the "aestheticism of an asocial group made of up of pseudo-apolitical

individuals, partisans of a personal art of pleasure... partisans of the so-called 'poetic factor,' of the 'sub-conscious', of ghosts."[18]

Some of Nacho López's pictures of window displays—the ones that he made for Industrias Eléctricas Mexicanas and General Electric—are based on the same deconstructive principle as Álvarez Bravo's, but include mechanically rendered advertising graphics (instead of the hand-painted signs depicted in Álvarez Bravo's work). *"This is where we must live"*: Nacho López's city is a rapidly growing industrial city full of skyscrapers, foreign brands and sophisticated appliances. Next to his photographs in the magazine *Mañana*, there is an ad for *"Nido Multifort Superautomático: 100% waterproof, antimagnetic and impact resistant."* The back cover of the same publication bears an ad for the newly-developed residential area named *Jardines del Pedregal de San Ángel*, "the ideal place to live": first-class real estate where one can find all of the city's commodities in the beautiful natural landscape of a weekend retreat. The contrast between the elements that appear in López's photographs of window displays is like Fuentes's descriptions in *Where the Air is Clear*: a reflection of the contradictory history and reality of Mexico. This is the case of López's inverted window display, which, unlike Álvarez Bravo's photograph, was taken from the inside, with the window framing a crowd of onlookers: this is the Mexico of *"newsboys, beggars and* ruleteros, *a stream of oil-stained t-shirts,* rebozos, *corduroy pants and worn-out shoes."* All of these window-shoppers' attention seems to be absorbed by a very modern vacuum cleaner, firmly placed upon a pedestal in the window display, which seems to be sucking on a big inflatable ball. Nothing could better illustrate López's famous phrase, "they are behind bars and we are on the outside. If we invert this image, then we become the captives."[19] Confined as he is within the space of the store's window display, López achieves a masterful portrait of the public captivated by fascinating and alienating commercial propaganda. While Álvarez Bravo takes formal and conceptual risks in *Parábola óptica*, López's risks are taken on a social and ideological level.

Another image of windows, *Músico*, from the series *Trabajadores ambulantes*, functions in a similar manner. A saxophone-playing street musician is framed by a café window: behind him we see cars around Bucareli square, the El Caballito statue, the old Art Deco-style National Lottery building, and the inverted text that indicates that this is a view from inside a café. It is a casual and yet perfect montage of different components of Mexico City's urban life in the 1950s, and an accomplished visual analogy of the literary setting of *Where the Air is Clear*: the Bucareli square that is the stomping grounds of the character Gladys García. It is a complex image where the window's transparency paradoxically lends the image a sense of historical and visual density.

Even though they are superimposed, the different planes in *Músico* are easily distinguished. But in other pictures by López such as *Zapatería* or *Barrendero*, the planes appear to dissolve or blend into each other much like Álvarez Bravo's *Caballo en aparador*. In *Zapatería*, the photographer once again took the picture inside the window display—one that is at an angle with the store's entrance. This allows for the superimposition of several elements: the feet with their display-model shoes, the passersby walking past, the pavement of the street, the buildings in the background and their

reflections in the storefront windowpane. This layering of elements and their reflections is rather confusing in spite of the fact that they appear in sharp focus, contrasting with their blurriness in *Barrendero*.

More daydream than reality, *Barrendero* features several images dissolving and interpenetrating each other: a morose kid sweeping the sidewalk, the nude figures of a baroque painting, pieces of its ornate frame and buildings in the distance. This masterful image belongs to a series from which López published another excerpt in his 1964 essay *Yo, el ciudadano*, with the unusual title of *Amor (Love)*.[20]

The aforesaid pictures are only a few examples of the many photographs Nacho López took while experimenting with the possibilities of window displays and reflections. In order to disconcert the viewer, he makes use of spots and streaks on the glass in some of them, and in others, water or steam covering the windowpane. As a result, inside blurs with outside, the self is embodied by the other, the reflection or the stain become notions of identity.

On the border between confusion and dispersion—in short, "on the razor's edge"—Nacho López's *avant-garde* photographs seem to refute photography's capacity to faithfully represent its subject. In this sense, they allow us to say that avant-garde photography did not end in the 1920s or 1930s. To a certain extent, they suggest that the goals of the *pioneering* aesthetics of the 1930s—characterized by "art in motion, creative swiftness, a socialization of art"—were not entirely achieved until the 1950s: in his photographs, Nacho López accomplished a synthesis of the urban and social modernity foreshadowed by Gustavo Ortíz Hernán, Martín Paz, Manuel Gallardo and his own writings.[21]

Based on all these reasons, it could be said that Nacho López's photography has managed to be innovative by looking at the past. Nonetheless, it also looks towards the future. Couldn't his *Venus se fue de juerga por los barrios bajos* be considered to perfectly reconcile Surrealist aesthetics with post-modern, conceptual art actions? During that apparently barren period for culture and art known as *el milagro mexicano*—the "Mexican miracle," an era of impressive economic growth, from around the 1930s to the 1970s—Nacho López's photography, writings and academic work seem like a powerful *avant-garde* project: a unassuming link between the historical avant-garde of the 1920s and 1930s, and that of the photographers who belonged to the artists' collectives of the 1970s known as the *Grupos*.

Notes

1 César Carrillo Trueba and Citlalli López Binnqüist, "El mundo indígena en la fotografía de Nacho López," *Alquimia*, year 1, issue #2, January–April 1998, p. 16.

2 Olivier Debroise, *Fuga mexicana.Un recorrido por la fotografía en México*, Barcelona, Gustavo Gili, 2005, p. 284.

3 Nacho López, "La fotografía como factor en la plástica mexicana" *Hoy*, issue #844, April 25, 1953, p. 23.

4 A thorough list of López's writings is provided in John Mraz's excellent study, *Nacho López y el fotoperiodismo de los años cincuenta*, Mexico City, Océano, INAH / CONACULTA, 1999, pp. 223–226.

5 Nacho López, "Yo, el ciudadano" in *La ciudad de México, Artes de México*, year XII, issue #58–59, 1964, pp. 25–27. The photographic essay takes up the remainder of the issue.

6 Susan Kismaric, *Manuel Álvarez Bravo*, New York, MoMA, 1997, pp. 28–35; Ian Jeffrey, "Opting for Realism," *Documentary and Anti-Graphic. Photographs by Walker Evans, Cartier Bresson & Álvarez Bravo*, Paris,

Maison Européenne de la Photographie/Steidl, 2004, pp. 55–58; Debroise, *op. cit.*, pp. 317–325.

7 Laura González Flores, "Agustín Jiménez y la vanguardia fotográfica mexicana," *Anales del Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas*, vol. XXVII, issue #86, Mexico City, Spring 2005.

8 Bürger argues for the *avant-garde's* self-destructive quality in Hegel's theses on the death of art. Peter Bürger, *Teoría de la vanguardia*, Barcelona, Ediciones Península, 1997, pp. 166–177.

9 Trueba and López Binnqüist, *ibid.*

10 Obviously, this statement is reductive and constitutes a generalization. I am referring to the hegemonic tendency in modern American photography represented by Weston, Strand, Stieglitz, Adams, etc. However, it must be noted that there was also another vein of photography with *avant-garde* overtones connected to the establishment of the influential Bauhaus school in Chicago. This photography is best exemplified by the work of Laszlo Moholy-Nagy and his students: Ray Metzger, Harry Callahan, etc. *See* David Travis & Elizabeth Siegel, *Taken by Design. Photographs from the Institute of Design 1937–1971*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press/Art Institute of Chicago, 2002.

11 For a much more comprehensive discussion, see Laura González Flores, *Fotografía y pintura, ¿dos medios diferentes?*, Barcelona, Gustavo Gili, 2004, pp. 201–236.

12 Susan Kismaric, *Manuel Álvarez Bravo*, New York, MoMA, 1997, p. 26. Carlos Córdova notes that this contest was part of the Exposición Permanente de Productos Nacionales (Permanent Exhibition of Domestic Goods), and that Álvarez Bravo won with his two versions of *Caballo en aparador*. Agustín Jiménez received an honorable mention at the same contest. Carlos Córdova, *Agustín Jiménez y la vanguardia fotográfica mexicana*, Mexico City, Editorial RM, 2005, p. 62.

13 Álvarez Bravo published the photograph in its original, non-inverted form in *Arte y plata* in August 1945. *Parábola optica* is not the only picture Álvarez Bravo printed the wrong way around: he did the same with *Caballito de carro de helados*, published in the magazine *Imagen* (issue #12, September 15, 1933) to illustrate Marx de Formaro's article "Los niños, los juegos y los juguetes."

14 Enrique Krauze, "Cuatro estaciones de la cultura mexicana" in *La historia cuenta. Antología*, Mexico City, Tusquets, 1998, p. 141-162.

15 Krauze, *op. cit.*, pp. 157-158.

16 *Ibid.*, p.146.

17 Antonio Rodríguez, "El maestro de la fotopoesía" in *Así*, July 28, 1945, in *Alquimia*, year 7, issue #19, September–December 2003, p. 42.

18 Siqueiros in *Así*, August 18, 1945, quoted by José Antonio Rodríguez, "Los años decisivos" in Manuel Álvarez Bravo, *Los años decisivos, 1925-1945*, exhibition catalogue, Mexico City, Museo de Arte Moderno, 1992, p. 18.

19 Trueba and López Binnqüist, p. 17.

20 The photograph published in 1964 (no. 47 in the catalogue *Yo, el ciudadano*) was edited, and instead of the boy sweeping, we see a couple, a man and woman, walking. There are other pictures from the same series: two with a couple of women in different poses in front of the window display, and another with a single woman, which shows other paintings in the background reflected in the windowpane. López, *Yo, el ciudadano, ibid.*

21 Carlos Monsiváis, "Notas sobre la cultura mexicana del siglo XX" in Daniel Cosío Villegas (ed.), *Historia general de México*, vol. 2, Mexico City, El Colegio de México, p. 1444.

tr. F. Fenton/C. Navarro

The Last Roll

Marco Antonio Cruz

For the first anniversary of David Alfaro Siqueiros's death, in 1975, a significant event took place at the Rotonda de los Hombre Ilustres in

Dolores Cemetery: artist Armando Ortega's sculpture *Prometheus* was unveiled, and Angélica Arenal de Siqueiros presided over a long table of notable attendees.

Someone caught my attention during the event: a photographer who was taking pictures of the table with a medium-format camera, which he held at his waist. I assume that, given the format, he was having trouble capturing the image in its totality, and thus began walking slowly backwards, still focusing his camera without noticing a myrtle bush behind him. His fall caused a racket in the middle of the solemn ceremony, but he got up immediately and got back to work, as if nothing had happened. I asked Rogelio Villareal, who was next to me, if he knew the photographer's name: Nacho López, he said.

I saw Nacho López again several years later, in 1982, at a photographers' meeting at the auditorium of the *Unomásuno* newspaper that Héctor García also attended; the discussion revolved around the need to create a group of independent photographers.

The next time we met was in 1985. One afternoon, Nacho came to *La Jornada*'s editorial office where I was working, looking for Andrés Garay, a former student of his, and they both invited me along to the Montecarlo cantina, downtown on Revillagigedo street. A passionate conversation about photography ensued, steeped in copious quantities of beer.

In 1986, I found out that Nacho's health was not good, and that he had had surgery to have a pacemaker implanted. I went to see him while he was recovering at the Mocel Hospital in the San Miguel Chapultepec neighborhood. When I got there, I waited in the hallway for visiting hours to begin. It was a dark, silent place and smelled of medicine. Nearby, an orderly mopped the floor slowly. Nacho was lying down when I went into his room. He greeted me and we started talking about various things; I felt awkward asking him how he was feeling.

He noticed I had brought him an old Leica camera; it was totally mechanical and, though it didn't have a light meter, it had two viewfinders: one for focusing and the other for framing. I had picked out that particular camera, knowing that Nacho liked Leicas. He guessed that I wanted to take a picture but that the circumstances held me back. He moved his hand and said, "If I were to take a picture right now, with this light... I'd take it at 1/30 of a second at f. 2.8." Nacho didn't use a light meter and, especially when it was a portrait shot, he calculated the exposure with his hand: he moved it around until he equaled the quantity of light on his subject's face. "Why don't you take a picture of me?" he eventually said. In this unexpected situation, I set the camera following his indications; I focused and, a fraction of a second before I clicked the shutter, Nacho uncovered his chest, showing me where the surgery had been performed. It all happened very quickly, and then we just stared at each other for a quite awhile.

I've kept that picture for twenty years—the account of such a special, personal moment. I think now is the right time to publish it.

Nacho López was already in the hospital when I decided to tell him that I was interested in doing a proper, thorough photo-report. I needed to know how to structure it and he was one of the few people who could help me, given his broad experience. For this reason, we agreed to meet after he'd recovered.

I showed up at his house with Ángeles Torrejón one afternoon. I remember that we went into Nacho's bedroom. He

asked Ángeles if she knew his work, and then gave her a copy of his book *Yo, el ciudadano*. We talked about photography and social commitment as an essential component of journalism. It was a masterful class. Since then, I've done my best to apply what I learned in my day-to-day work and in the workshops I give. We continued talking about different things, and we agreed that I'd work on the subject of Mexico City organ-grinders, and meet once a week to put together a report. When we said goodbye, the image of Nacho in bed stuck with me, lit by a dim reddish glow coming from the window. It was dusk in Mexico City. It was the last time we saw each other, as Nacho died two days later.

Not too long afterwards, his daughter Citlalli, wonderful friend that she is, gave me a magazine for 35mm film that had belonged to her father. It was gold-colored and contained one cartridge. For a while I kept it in a display cabinet at home, without even daring to touch it. Once when Andrés Garay came by, I mentioned the magazine and he asked me to give it to him. Nacho López represented a lot to him: besides their student-teacher relationship, they had been dear friends and spent an important part of their lives together. Garay deserved to have Nacho López's "last roll." I, on the other hand, had inherited an object that Nacho appreciated as much as his cameras: the mortar and pestle in which he prepared his famous salsas.

I saw Garay again a while later, and he told me that he'd decided to process the film. He had set up the lab for the purpose and performed a special ceremony. He burned incense, carefully mixed new chemicals, inserted the film onto the reel in the dark, developed and fixed it. When he finally opened the developing tank, he was surprised to see that the film had never been used: it didn't have a single picture on it.

July 2006

tr. Richard Moszka

NACHO LÓPEZ. Ciudad de México, ca. 1950.
Fondo Nacho López © 403884 CONACULTA-INAH-SINAFO-Fototeca Nacional









